

Peter-Lukas Graf

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The First Meeting

At the end of the fifties I came to Munich to prepare for an occupational change from orchestra flautist to opera conductor. I still played the flute and did not want to stop completely. And since in those days in Switzerland I had given concerts with the only good Cembalist, Eduard Müller, Munster organist from Basel. I asked him: "What shall I do in Munich? Do you know anybody there?" He answered: "Of course! Karli is there, go to Karli, give him my best regards and tell him he should play with you." Richter was naturally a known name for me, but nothing more.

So I came to Munich and saw an advertisement for Handel-Organ concerts in the Markuskirche. I went to the Concert. Unfortunately I had a seat from which I was not able to see the gallery, so I was not able to see Richter, who I did not know. But it was one of the very few Concerts in my life, where I was fascinated from the first to the last note and the way the music was performed filled me with a sort of exaltation. Afterwards I went up to the gallery to look for Richter. There was practically no-one left. Just one person was walking around wearing a Mackintosh, looking rather inconspicuous. I asked him: "Could you tell me, who is Mr. Richter?" He gave me a curious look and said: "Yours truly". That was my first meeting with Karl Richter.

I was not what you would call shy and said: "I'm Peter-Lukas Graf, kind regards from Herr Müller, would you like to play with me?" He was a bit surprised but it paid off, shortly after we had a Bach Evening together in the Markuskirche, playing Flute and cembalo.

Rehearsals for Ottobeuren

We had planned to play five sonatas for the flute from Händel. One or two days before I wanted the opportunity of practising with him. I couldn't find him in the academy, then it was said, he was here, then there, but I still couldn't find him. In the end I found him in the Markuskirche, teaching. I urged him to rehearse with me, but he said he was not in the mood, that we should first go and have a coffee or a beer. So it went until we finally finished up in the Music Academy, and our rehearsal went as follows: First Sonata, first movement. Finished. He looked at me and said: "Carry on". Second movement, he looked at me again, "Carry on". Third Movement, he looked at me again "Carry on". And that's the way it went until all five sonatas were played and that was our joint cooperative rehearsal.

When we mounted the podium in Ottobeuren, he asked me on the way: "How are you going to begin the first movement? piano or forte?" He wanted to know how many stops he had to pull. That was his way of doing things. But at this concert, the singer Maria Stader was sitting in the audience and she told me afterwards, that the intensive interplay between two musicians who had not prepared very much together in advance was, for her, a tremendous experience.

Articulation on the Organ

Once a student played a Bach composition, while Richter paced the gallery, smoking and listening to him. Then I saw from a distance, how he briefly whispered something to him and he said: "Let me play it myself" and sat down and did so. And it was a completely different composition, and I thought not only is the composition different but the organ as well. It was something totally new for me, that the use of articulation could achieve a completely different sound. I thought at first, that he had changed the register, but it was just his articulation alone, that had changed everything.

The Mass in B minor in Schaffhausen

I can especially remember a certain Mass in b-Minor. It was loaded with an inner anticipation of the kind I had experienced during the first Händel Concert, of the kind that broadly speaking I myself very seldom experienced in the course of my life.

The Munich Bach Choir

I had no way of comparing. I didn't go to England until later. England has a fantastic choir tradition. There every choir is better than everything I had ever heard up till then in Switzerland. The Munich Bach choir though, was the best choir I had ever come across before, be it Swiss or otherwise. There is no question about it. The choir was very young with very young voices. Richter was very strict if not to say dictatorial. He possessed a fearful authority and he achieved this through great severity. That was my impression in those days.

Musical Teamwork

When he accompanied Händel Sonaten for example, you have to say accompany, because they were pure Continuo Sonatas, he used to play in a way which today of course would be a bit criticised, because his choice of instrument could not be regarded as historically oriented. And as a very creative and spontaneous musician he used every opportunity to play the cembalo. And then, sometimes surprises would happen. At that time I used to play everything off by heart, and when his Cembalo would suddenly flare up in the middle of a Händel Sonate, I was of course both irritated and fascinated, but I really had to concentrate to keep up with him. It was very exciting, but never very easy. There were never any problems as far as musical teamwork was concerned. I could sense what he had in mind as a conductor anyway. If am in an orchestra I try my very best to do what the conductor expects of me. His vision and his charisma were so clear cut, that no problems ever arose. Except maybe through his accompaniment.

Bach's Sonata for Flute in B minor

For a Flautist the Sonata in B minor belongs to the best and outstanding Works in our relatively small and modest Flute literature. It stands out even in Baroque milieu. The first movement, the Andante, is I believe the longest piece of Chamber music to be found in the first place, and is made up of a row of themes and motives, with which the movement is constructed. I have analysed it systematically, to find out how Bach did it. I believe nobody will ever get to the root of it. It's like a woven carpet and it is a miracle that the whole thing hangs together. The proportions are so fantastic, but cannot be rationally explained so that for me a wonder remains especially in this first movement. The second movement is special insofar as Bach himself, for once calls for a Continuo voice, naturally in a Richter-like fashion, one could say. Very liberally dealt with, very liberal harmonies for two or even five voices in part especially composed just for that purpose. These are the distinctive features of these pieces.

Various Flutes

During my life I have changed flutes very often. The flutes that I no longer played were given away on the spot I played various makes and changed for various reasons. In the beginning it was different but then again we were not so spoiled as the youth of today who even in their student days are on the look-out for Platinum or Gold and wood or such, or gold or platinum plated, and think that makes them better flautists. We were happy if we had a good Flute, today it's difficult to find a poor one. Today a very high standard prevails in the Flute production so the situation is different. A year and a half ago two golden flutes were stolen from me at Zürich airport and sadly I had to start looking for a new instrument. I'm still a bit on the look out.

Concert Tour Switzerland/Italy 1967

I took a Minox Camera along and a film for 52 photos. During this tour I did my very best to take good photographs. 52 times I photographed from various positions, lying on the floor, standing on a chair, so that I could catch Richter in every possible stance and so that I could take photos of the beautiful churches and the pretty Bach-Chorister, we used to call them "Bachantinnen" in those days. When I came home, I went to the Photographer at once I was more than curious to see the photographs, but there was no film in the camera. That was my big disappointment from this tour.

Otherwise I have fond memories of fine concerts. In one Cathedral or other, I can't remember anymore where it was, maybe in Vicenza or maybe somewhere else the front row was made up of high church dignitaries all dressed up in violet gowns. After the choir's introduction to the Matthäus Passion they all began applauding and calling "bravi bravi". As a protestant Swiss that annoyed me very much.

Later Contact With Richter

I had one more concert with him in England and then nothing more, I knew his wife very well, he used to live in Switzerland, in Erlenbach. We often used to meet there privately.

Rehearsal for the Cantata BWV-140

The Cantata "Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme" has a wonderful prelude. I sat in the studio during a gramophone recording and listened to how Richter rehearsed it, was during a period in which I was mainly engaged as a conductor. So of course I was always more than interested in what he did in this direction. And full of envy I discovered, that within only five to ten minutes he could completely alter the sound of the strings, without a word, without explaining anything. It was audible, it was a completely different sound as in the beginning. I said to him: "That was wonderful the way you did that" and he said to me: "Oh yes that is Bach's mystical Piano"

Richter's Importance

Richter did not only mean something to me. At the end of the fifties, everyone in Munich knew who Richter was. There weren't so many records in those days and I was not one to listen to or collect Gramophone records anyway. Richter was unimpeachable. I had never heard anything negative about him. It was only after the historical landslide that criticism started.